Sustainable and sustaining objects

Session 5

*Making custodians; furniture as intergenerational objects* – Penelope FORLANO

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Making custodians: furniture as intergenerational objects

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Design

The creative practice project ‘Endless Quilt’ explores the idea of creating an heirloom object from waste material; exploring the transformation through design and making from disregarded material to treasured artifact. The ‘Endless Quilt’ aims to test how furniture designers can shift their view of users as ‘consumers’ to ‘custodians’, and take a material culture approach to designing future heirlooms. Through this testing, and its theoretical underpinning, extrinsic and intrinsic qualities of kinship ‘knowingness’ expressed materially have been identified as means to encourage a custodian relationship and create heirloom objects.

This paper will contribute to sustainable design research by synthesising findings on object’s personal meaning as related to the “kinship embedded self” (Heisley and Cours 2007), and custodian behaviour, as one method to reduce premature disposal of furniture and therefore waste creation. In particular, I will speculate on the pre-acquisition condition for the design of heirlooms based on the comprehensive findings in post-acquisition studies in heirloom, special and personal objects from Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton’s seminal text ‘The Meaning of Things’ (1981). The findings and theories presented herein contribute to a proposed critical framework for the design of intergenerational objects. This research specifically relates to objects considered by the possessor as inseparable from the self (Belk 1988) and have high levels of personal meaning, significance and investment (Jung et al. 2011; Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981).

The ‘Endless Quilt’ creative work will then be analysed against the intergenerational framework thereby critiquing and explaining a potential pre-acquisition condition to encourage a custodial relationship necessary for intergenerational objects. The paper will describe how the design and making of the ‘Endless Quilt’ artifact also challenges mainstream design practice by viewing the user as a custodian and co-creator rather than solely a consumer.

Keywords: heirloom; inalienable; furniture design, custodian; personal meaning; kinship;
Introduction

Personal meaning is claimed as an essential component in the quadruple bottom line of sustainable design (Walker 2011). The ‘Triple Bottom Line’, introduced in 1994, is a widely adopted accounting framework for sustainability, to include the full costs; social, environmental and economic (Elkington 1997). Stuart Walker has expanded upon this framework to consider a fourth component; the personal and spiritual cost. He calls for designers to consider the personal and spiritual meaning of their practice, as an essential part of sustainable design. This paper aims to contribute to this area of research and responds to this call.

I propose that a personal meaning that is closely aligned to the self that is embedded in the context of ‘other’ kin relations, that is, the “kinship embedded self” (Heisley and Cours, 2007, 426), can inform the design of personally meaningful objects. By focusing on the aspects of personal meaning that connects to the greater kinship group, this may encourage the attachment of personal meaning to the objects by subsequent generations of the family, thereby gaining heirloom status.

The ‘Endless Quilt’ project reflects both me and my partner’s kinship embedded self as a way of creating a family heirloom for our children. Akin to traditional quilting techniques of binding together fabric off cuts to construct meaningful family heirlooms, the ‘Endless Quilt’ assembles discarded manufacturing waste to construct a headboard to be treasured by future generations and to occupy the most personal of domestic rooms, the bedroom.

Figure 1: Endless Quilt, Headboard and side table in context, 2012. 2100 x 1200 x 70mm. Image source: Forlano, P. 2012.

Intergenerational objects

Inalienable possessions, (colloquially termed, heirlooms) have been extensively examined in relation to their symbolic, social and psychological representations post-acquisition (Curasi, Price, and Arnould 2004; Komter 2001; Jung et al. 2011; Appadurai
The fact that these heirloom objects are passed down through the generations is indicative that they hold high significance to the kin group.

The person possessing these inalienable objects is likely to view themselves as a temporary custodian, rather than an owner. As a custodian, individuals carry the responsibility of caring for the physical object whilst also caring for, and keeping the inalienable aspect of the object; that is, its narrative and history; alive through remembrance and storytelling. Much like a personal photo album, objects of the domestic interior can recall memories of events, places or people. These objects gain significance as a means to keep family history alive through the retelling of the associated stories to younger generations, maintaining the kinship identity.

Cherished and inalienable possessions are not retained simply for their exchange value, akin to an investment, but are instead indexical1 (Cherrier 2010; Grayson and Shulman 2000), evidential of significant past people, events, time and place to the kinship group (Curasi, Price, and Arnould 2004; Heisley and Cours 2007). Again, like a photo album, value stems from the irreplaceable mnemonic qualities of the possessor.

Although furniture has in the past been widely associated with heirlooms, current consumer attitudes are, in the mainstream, the antithesis of this. Family heirloom furniture is less prevalent in the contemporary consumption practice (McCraken 1988) and rate of disposability of functioning furniture shows little, to no signs of slowing down (Naish 2008). Fuelled by advertising, marketing and price point, some of the most functionally enduring of our everyday objects; furniture, have become construed as seasonal and disposable commodities.

So how can designers encourage a less wasteful consumer attitude, and shift consumer desires towards custodianship? If designers are unable to control the person-object post-acquisition relationship, how may they, at least encourage a custodian-like behaviour through their design?

Material culture studies reinforce how few objects which exit the commodity sphere are given personalised meaning or “singularization”2 (Kopytoff 1986, Epp and Price, 2010). Of those, even fewer retain meaning across generations to become inalienable (Epp and Price 2008; McGraw, Tetlock, and V. Kristel 2003). However, as my “demonstration artefact” (Fuad-Luke 2009, 83) shows, there exists an opportunity to employ techniques to create objects that reflect the “kinship embedded self” (Heisley and Cours, 2007, 426) in lieu of a self-concept which is ever-changing and results in object disposability.

The kinship embedded self is, as Heisley and Cours assert, “one of the most powerful ‘other’ contexts” (2007, 426) which is discussed in relation to heirloom objects in their study. Research in the design field acknowledges the need for heirloom-like objects

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1 In Grayson and Shulmans’ 2000 article, the researchers propose that “irreplaceable special possessions are indices (in the Peircean sense of ‘indexical’) …because they have a factual, spatial connection with the special events and people they represent. Given Peirce’s assertions regarding the nature of indices… the indexicality of irreplaceable possessions allows them to serve a factual or evidentiary function for their owners… They verify important moments of personal history. While a reproduction of a special possession may look exactly like the original object, it cannot claim an indexical (real, factual, and spatial) association with the context and/or people that are represented by the object.”(2000, 19). ‘Contaminated’ is similarly used in the context of irreplaceable possessions by consumer behaviour researchers for objects displaying evidence as introduced by Belk (1989, 6).

2 “…in effect, commodities are singularized by being pulled out of their usual commodity sphere.” (Kopytoff 1986, 74). Generally singularized objects do not have a common exchange value; it may be perceived anywhere on the scale from priceless or worthless, due to the cultural or personal appropriation of the object. When entering the home, Kopytoff believes this singularizes, or makes the personal meaning of the object whilst in a network of social relations outside its usual commodity sphere. The object acquires a cultural biography, also referred to as a social life, in the home between the phase of acquisition and recommodified back into the exchange or waste sphere. (See also Epp and Price, 2010)
that are enduring, (Chapman 2005; Chapman 2014; Walker 2010) or have personal or spiritual meaning (Walker 2010, 2011). However, there lacks substantial theory on how, through designing and making, a designer may create new heirloom objects reflecting kinship stories, values and identity.

Object attachment for example, may extend an object’s use life, but if tied to one individual’s experience and not wider values and connectedness, the object may detach and fall short of heirloom status. Although personal meaning may incorporate spiritual values, it is the concept of a self that is intertwined and understood within the context of kin that is most associated with heirloom objects. As Csikszentmihalyi and Rochburg-Halton conclude in their studies, “The strongest ties that the self establishes are still to relatives, not to abstract principles, institutions, or groups” (1981, 120).

Object knowingness

Through my research synthesis, I propose that what is the foremost design consideration of new heirloom furniture is the holding within, and expression of, a kinship knowingness. Knowing is defined as “showing or suggesting that one has knowledge or awareness that is secret or known to only a few people” (Oxford Dictionary, 2015). The material expression of this knowing, should therefore act to trigger and recall memory with positive emotional and/or familial ties, whilst endearing itself to the possessor with its intrinsic object qualities. It is, in large part, this “knowingness” of the material artefact that renders it inalienable, necessitating intergenerational ownership transfer. As long as it remains symbolic of kin history and relations, the object has the potential to become indexical and therefore evade disposal.

Ways of materially manifesting this knowingness of heirloom objects can be evidenced in several ways. The extrinsic qualities are crucial; however the intrinsic sensorial and contemplative qualities can further support and strengthen the person-object relationship.

Table 1: Intergenerational endearment framework

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Object knowingness</th>
<th>Extrinsic qualities</th>
<th>Intrinsic qualities</th>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(knowledge shared between person to person evidenced through the object)</td>
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<tr>
<td>sensorial</td>
<td>Evidential of past positive emotion</td>
<td>Versatility or control of functionality</td>
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<tr>
<td>contemplative</td>
<td>Provision of future pleasure/ emotion</td>
<td>Unique tactile engagement</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Memory or narrative</td>
<td>Discovery</td>
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Firstly, extrinsic qualities are clear only to those in the know, for example the kinship group, or possessor. Its significance lies in the knowledge transference and/or the emotional knowingness and relationship between people evidenced through the object.

The object provides a point of reference to this extrinsic quality, for example;

- the memory or narrative through co-participation in the making process, the consumption and/or the on-going user experience,
- material trigger of past positive emotion of event, time or place and
- the provision of future pleasure and emotional investment.

The extrinsic qualities are the most significant due to their reliance on emotionally loaded memory of the often private knowledge shared within the group. Mnemonic representation may be of significant times, events, people and places that make up the kinship group identity. The object may form a conduit for emotional connection to past, present or future others; such as the maker, designer, users and/or future custodians.

Mnemonic qualities that reveal stories which characterise both the kinship group and the self are of particular significance to maintain the relationship between the object and to each subsequent individual to which it is given or bequeathed over time. The mnemonic expression may for example represent extensive and factual ancestral information or indirectly trigger memories rich in emotion. Just as gifts from loved ones that have died may provide comfort (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981), there is also the scope for objects intentionally designed as heirlooms to create a sense of connectedness to kin, under this framework.

Secondly, the sensorial or contemplative qualities have been categorised as intrinsic as it results from a direct object knowledge and relationship. The materiality of the object that has come in physical contact with the user/s, particularly when it is over long time periods or regular use, can be viewed as a physical self-extension; an indispensable object that 'knows' the user.

Intrinsic sensorial examples include;

- unique tactile engagement
- versatility or control of functionality through a variety of physical engagements.

Person-object knowingness from a sensorial everyday ritual experience can further build memory, association and familiarity over time. Furthermore, objects that can give sensorial pleasure in times of discomfort is also cited as reasons for objects to be valued as precious or beloved and should be considered as crucial by the designer of future heirlooms (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Belk 1988). The distinctive tactile quality of a pattered relief in a relative’s tea cup for example, may remind the user of a childhood experience with that relative. Similarly an object like a well worn armchair can form a bond that renders the object seemingly indispensible as it knows the user intimately.

An object can be ‘contaminated’ in a positive way, with emotional significance that an identical object can never hold (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1998). Research has demonstrated that mass-produced, ubiquitous objects can become precious through contamination (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981). Knowing that the object was made or touched by an ancestor for example, strengthens the person-object relationship through an inalienable past thereby sacralising it (Belk 2006). The opportunity for user participation in the fabrication or assembly of furniture to render it special or contaminated can be further explored by designers.
Objects can have a rich kinaesthetic knowing through experience, to create reciprocal subject-object knowingness; like a necklace that conforms to a user’s body and warms up upon contact. Designers can consciously prompt attachment by incorporating the user’s need to invest pleasurable time and energy (Csikszentmihalyi 2006) in object maintenance, and in the control of it’s functionality (Jung et al. 2011). The user’s physical interaction also allows for subsequent meaning making opportunities to emerge; a narrative about the object’s coming-into-being and the physical experience.

Intrinsic contemplative qualities of the object are directly observed by the possessor requiring a mental engagement with the object to understand it. These qualities can inform the possessor about the object whereby the possessor feels he/she has gained specialist knowledge, for example:

- Uniqueness and rarity; making its distinctiveness perceivable to the observer.
- Perceptible age of the object demonstrating that it has a history and a life of use, (despite the user perhaps, not knowing its precise history, thereby differentiating it from extrinsic knowledge).
- A sense of discovery which through use, close examination or engagement with the object, reveals it has hidden or symbolic information.

I will focus now only on the qualities of the categories outlined above, which have manifested through creative practice in the ‘Endless Quilt’ project.

**Creative Practice: Endless Quilt**

![Image](image-url)

*Figure 2: Endless Quilt headboard. Operable components shown in closed position. Image Source: Forlano, P. 2012.*

Reminiscent of fabric quilt attributes, the ‘Endless Quilt’ assembles discarded manufacturing waste to construct a bedroom headboard to reflect ancestry. The work reflects the kinship embedded self of me and my husband as an object for us and for future generations. It is designed as a personal, contemplative object and as such was designed to occupy the most personal and contemplative of domestic rooms, the bedroom.
The 'Endless Quilt' project was conceived to reflect my family history by mapping my children's ancestral heritage and engaging in probing discussions with family members (fig.2). Discussions focussed on events, places and times that marked significant life changes or periods that have formed their personal and/or family identity. As a member of this ancestry, I was armed with private knowledge which allowed me to further the discussions.

Conceived as a quilted form, with a visual narrative to imbue meaning and kinship connectedness, the separate and tessellating geometric modules allows for future distribution and re-assemblage amongst several kin.

In lieu of a finished/closed object intended for many, 'Endless Quilt' is a hybrid object intended for very few. A hybrid object is defined as having a combination of closed or finished components and open or modifiable components (Fuad-Luke, 2009). This allows for additional parts to be fabricated with an unlimited range of engraved graphics to allow for future modification and endless variations as events and time unfold, to remain connected to current and new custodians.

Made from off-cut materials; metal, fibreglass and sail cloth (from our family's manufacturing business) and off-cut timber floorboards, it demonstrates how waste product can become inalienable and reflect a kinship embedded self through specific design and making processes.

**Extrinsic qualities**

Across various fields of research into inalienable and intergenerational transfer of objects, the most commonly cited reason for object preciousness is the narrative (Chapman 2005), memory and "singularization" (Kopytov 1986) of the object. The 'Endless Quilt' project most notably employs extrinsic qualities of object knowingness by embedding an opportunity for an emotional connection through co-creation and material treatment. For example, the user can be involved in the co-creation process by
telling family stories which form the basis of the designer’s customized engravings. The user must also actively determine the number of components and the modular form demands a decision by the user from a multiplicity of arrangements.

Figure 4: Endless Quilt; close-up detail showing engraved poem ‘Serenate A Mamma’ by Modesto Della Porta, of 1924. Image source: FORM. 2012

Figure 5: Endless Quilt, close-up detail showing engravings of a nautical chart for Rottnest Island, and a pattern created from the plan of a WWII Kittyhawk Aircraft. Image source: Forlano, P. 2012

As the mnemonic and narrative quality is of greatest significance, this is incorporated extensively by symbolically representing ancestors’ significant life events or sense of identity. It is intended to be understood as an assemblage of the extended family identity and the self. These representations were laser engraved onto the timber components to reveal the stories and make them visually present in the home. It is intended that this visual presence in the everyday environment can trigger memory and provoke discussion about the past and ancestry without strictly shaping one particular interpretation. By provoking family discussion, it aims to create new memories with the object, by telling stories through the object.

By communicating their significant family stories at the design briefing stage, someone with no skills in furniture design or making can still engage in a co-creation process and inform the design outcome. Furthermore, a process of discussion with family members can reveal new stories of significance, forming new family knowledge and emotive meaning not otherwise possible. For example, through this process I learnt that my father’s love of poetry was closely connected to a famous Italian poet, who was a close friend of his mother’s whilst he was growing up. It was a significant life experience for my father, which arose for the first time in discussion specifically due to this project’s process. Without this probing discussion to discern appropriate representation of family members, the more private individuals may not reveal their own experiences and these stories may be lost.

This demonstrates that although positive transformative emotional experience can be represented through the incidental objects of that experience, narratives which may have otherwise been forgotten can be re-activated by the design process of an intergenerational object.

Objects that come to represent multiple stories, spanning over longer time periods, as opposed to singular isolated events, can further strengthen kin connections to the objects. Through this explorative design process of assembling and representing
various family members’ stories, the furniture has begun to take on the role of a social other within the kinship group, by telling their stories.

**Intrinsic sensorial qualities**

The ‘Endless Quilt’ aims to form a sensory experience in several ways; shown here as fourteen modular parts, with rich tactile surfaces. The modular design allows for a multiplicity of arrangements and a combination of fixed and moving parts, some illuminated and others forming shelves. The opening and closing of the moving parts have a smooth and atypical movement due to the concealed magnets and fabric hinge. In comparison to standardised mechanisms, this design creates a unique kinaesthetic engagement which is intended to form a unique sensory memory. The versatility in the number and function of the parts and controlling the configuration of the modular assembly, also engages current and subsequent users into a physical and sensory decision making process.

The engraved texture also provides a rich and unique tactile experience whilst each also provides it’s own unique story. One example of the textural experience is the simulation of a 1940’s lacework made by hand by an ancestor; which is also associated with past positive emotion.

**Intrinsic contemplative qualities**

The knowledge by the possessor that the object or furniture is a one-off may provide an intellectual and emotional value by knowing its rarity (Ahuvia 2005; Jung et al. 2011). Whilst the intrinsic uniqueness can be valued by anyone with specialist knowledge of the object type, when applied to an object of unique extrinsic qualities, as required of an inalienable object, it strengthens and makes the uniqueness of the object undeniable.

The modular and hybrid approach also inherently builds in uniqueness, self-identity and thereby an authentic connection to the co-creator as the object is deemed ‘contaminated’ with the co-creators design decisions.
The interpretations of an object aging well over time; be it through a surface patina, elegant technological processes of its time or unique hand-skill, can also provide evidence of authenticity, age and heirloom status. Although not explicitly described by the aforementioned researchers, this manifestation of an object's longevity and age implies a prior life; surviving over time and history. Inheriting an object of aged appearance reifies the temporal quality of ancestral relationships and the kinship embedded self, and thereby, implying the object’s own knowing and connectedness to the kinship group and its past. The imperfect timber knots, combined with surface engravings imply a ‘worn in’ aged surface, of both contemporary technology and nature to convey this sense of a prior life.

Components which reveal a metal plate behind appear to be peeling away and only hint at its operability. These components may open to reveal reading lights (activated by a tilt switch), or a shelf as an example of ways to incorporate intrinsic qualities of discovery and ‘knowingness’.

Although not crucial in the creation of intergenerational objects specifically, discovery can extend object lifespan as the object can create ongoing ‘psychically active engagement’ (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981). The fabrication of this piece specifically utilises techniques that require close physical observation, reading of textual information and the opening and closing of elements to reveal its use. This promotes a physical and mental engagement in order to decode the meaning and use in a process of discovery, speculation and contemplation, strengthening the sense of secret or personal ‘knowingness’ between the object and the user.

Conclusion

Custodians are privy to intimate knowledge that is intrinsically and extrinsically manifested in the inalienable objects. Making the kinship embedded self actualised through furniture for example, can raise the object to the status of kinship icon. Designers cannot ensure the consumer becomes a custodian, however, the design process can powerfully initiate opportunities for reflecting the kinship embedded self, and for subsequent inheritors to ‘get to know’ the object and the stories it can tell.
This intimate ‘knowing’ contributes to the possessor’s perception that the relationship with the object is authentic and intimately shared between the person and object, often to the exclusion of others outside of the kinship group. Heirloom objects can ‘make’ the possessor a custodian, and the custodian ‘makes’ the object an heirloom, in a reciprocal relationship. Once this knowledge is shared within the kinship group, the object can further bind the group together strengthening shared memory, future responsibility and custodianship of the material artifact; thereby unmaking waste.

The person and kinship group come to ‘know’ the object intimately and tell their personal stories through the object. Conversely the object is ‘contaminated’ by the stories it contains within it; it appears to ‘know’ the family. Akin to an ancestor of the kinship group itself, it becomes an inalienable kinship object. Objects that become so precious and inalienable, is less likely to be viewed as disposable and therefore, future waste.

As discussed, one way to potentially ‘unmake’ waste is to minimize the likelihood of early object disposal by attempting to design future heirlooms based on material culture research. Although this has been demonstrated in an artifact for one extended family, the approach has particular relevance to the broader design discipline.

Can the design of other commodities for example, be designed for greater ‘knowingness’, such as a recording of family stories, or mnemonic representations that are integral to the materiality of the object? Can the consumer participate in a co-creation process and control of its functionality to strengthen their ties to the object?

Can domestic objects be fabricated in such a way to ensure that physical evidential use by ancestors remain visible and deeply meaningful thereby rendering it a mnemonic heirloom and potentially a social other?

The ‘Endless Quilt’ demonstrates how an object can be designed and made to initiate and support experiences to develop an ever deepening attachment through a ‘knowingness’ and by reflecting kinship. It is through various forms of knowing the object, that an object can be reconceptualised as a social other and support a strong long-term emotional attachment.

This project demonstrates the potential depth of meaning possible in everyday consumer objects when there is a paradigm shift by product designers to design for intergenerational family members, rather than a universal audience or even a small market segment. This framework is most suited to custom design, but also demonstrates the opportunity for using a digital process (like laser engraving), to customize standard components of larger production runs to embed personal meaning thereby minimizing waste.

The possessor that has become habituated into consuming as using up and making waste, may, through objects such as this, review their role as a custodian. Furthermore, designers are also habituated into designing only for the immediate possessors and not for future inheritors and perhaps should shift their thinking toward viewing their target market as custodians. Perhaps the role of the ethical and environmentally sustainable designer is to encourage and find ways for consumers to become custodians of the objects they use.
References


PhD candidate, Penelope Forlano has received the prestigious Australian Design Award (2006), and exhibited in Australia, the UK and Italy. Her research focuses on the nexus between emotion, sustainable design practice and digital fabrication. In 2011, her "Terrain" table was acquired for permanent collection by the Art Gallery of WA.
Crafting Waste: A Re-evaluation of a Furniture Practice

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Furniture design and making

The fundamentals of design provide tools and a way of thinking that is universal and transferable – design can be applied to anything at anytime. Everything around us, particularly the built environment and the ‘stuff’ we use - and the often-resulting waste - has been an act of design. Design, therefore, could be a powerful mechanism, an influential force and a potential driver for change. Although still often approached as simply a styling or aesthetic exercise, design is rather a highly complex activity consisting of a combination of social, cultural, ethical, historical, environmental, technological, economic and even emotional layers.

Through practice-led research I have been re-evaluating my understanding of design and how this can be distilled and applied to the field of furniture. By combining high-level practical skill and craft sensibilities fused with standard manufacturing technology (computer numeric control), I am approaching my work with an aim to reimagine how the utilisation of ubiquitous ‘stuff’ – material that would otherwise be generally classified as domestic waste – can be adapted, reused or reappropriated into potential objects of value.

The outcomes of this research currently comprise several pieces that are experimental in material use and serve strictly as furniture prototypes. Acting as case studies that seek to identify an alternate approach to design, this work aspires to give value and meaning to objects through materials deemed to have none.

Keywords: furniture, design, craft, skills, reuse
Introduction

The two works presented in this paper are not market-ready offerings nor fully resolved cultural commodities. They are physical exercises that attempt to reconcile an understanding of the complexities of sustainability and design by integrating discarded material into an individual craft-based furniture designer/maker practice.

The first of these works, Stool Prototype #4 (2014), is a working four-legged stool combining reused timber and plastic. The second, Cloud (2014), is a conceptual lighting installation. These studies represent a significant departure point from my previous practice of making furniture – one that extends beyond just the pursuit of aesthetics and function to become the test vehicle for ideas, acting as the mechanism through which to subscribe an ethical contribution to material culture.

A revisit: sustainability

Sustainability and the reduction of society’s environmental impact is arguably the most important challenge of the 21st Century. Despite having such a critical focal point, particularly within the field of design, it has been noted that resources continue to be depleted and waste continues to increase.¹ What currently shapes courses of action is perhaps a factor in this as the term ‘sustainability’ is highly complex, although often abused through green wash-marketing campaigns imparting confusion of meaning. In the context of a design and craft practice, understanding how sustainability actually fits within this model is an important area of exploration. To do this requires a revisit of fundamental principles.

As the major environmental imperative, sustainability at a basic practical level calls for the return to local resource use. Considering we live in an interconnected globalised economy, a return seems obvious as a means of decelerating climate change by reducing environmental impacts such as carbon footprints and waste created by the transportation of goods. Employing regional resources also has the value of stimulating a local community and economy and in turn could create resilience to variations in global commodity prices or markets.

Historically localism existed due to necessity. Perhaps an exclusive return to this may be problematic considering the expansive choice, cost and ease of procurement offered by a highly complex and fast evolving contemporary globalised world. However, an insight can be gained from considering an historic perspective that may offer adaptable solutions that can be reapplied to the current discourse surrounding sustainability and design (Fry 2009, 157).

This framework also incorporates craft skills. Tangible and practical skills derived from traditional craft methods are important underlying foundations to the overall quality, function, longevity and sustainment of our expanding built environment.

The old meets the new: conservation and design

Before discussing Stool Prototype #4 and Cloud it is important to offer a synopsis of conservation, a-now-underpinning constituent from which my practice evolves and

¹During 2006-2007, Australians generated approximately 43.8 million tonne of waste. On average this is 2080 kilograms of waste per person. It has been estimated that countrywide half of this total was recycled and from 2001 to 2007, a 12% increase in landfill waste was recorded (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2010).
grows. Conservation, a profession generally concerned with the preservation of objects of historic or cultural value, is typically not associated with design, although the field engages with the end results of design.

Fundamentally, design is the development of something ‘new.’ Conservation works from an entirely different perspective – at the end – and in reverse to the process of design. There is a dialogue that exists between the old (conservation) and the new (design); by asking simple questions around the long-term repercussions of design decisions and by understanding why something fails – from a design, material or a construction viewpoint – an opportunity presents itself to evaluate the practice of making from a new position, a design-reverse position.

Conservation also engages a range of techniques, many of which rely on historic and traditional craft skills. This has revitalised the importance of understanding materiality and heightened technical awareness by offering insight into construction methods capable of being reversed. This places focus on the whole design as a system of integrated removable parts. Many construction methods are permanent meaning if one part is rendered unusable – for example: breaks – the design is denied any opportunity for a future, to be fixed without destroying the whole. The dialogue between conservation and design places the traditional skillset of conservation as relevant and adaptable to the current pursuit of sustainable outcomes.

Conservation also raises very important questions around why ‘things’ are valued; why some objects have remained in circulation and others have vanished into obscurity or landfill. As a consequence I have begun to explore whether those ‘things’ we discard on a daily basis – what is deemed as waste – can be re-worked with craft skills to hold a new and useable value akin to conservation-worthy-objects.

As resources continue to be increasingly under threat from mass exploitation, there is an opportunity to capitalise on increasing efficiency in methods and to employ the reuse of existing materials (Moody and Nogrady 2010, 57-60). This approach of ‘making-do-with-what-exists’ offers another principal of sustainability, the attempt of ‘slowing down’ virgin-resource use to reduce environmental impact.
Case study: Stool Prototype #4 (2014)

Figure 3: Explorations for Stool Prototype #4 (2014). Laser cut HDPE from discarded milk bottles (left) combined with experimental dry joinery (right). 2014. Dimensions variable. Image by Halie Rubenis.

Stool Prototype #4 is strictly an experiment. The work is constructed from used plastic milk bottles (HDPE) for the seat and discarded wood for the under structure. The entire assembly, including the plastic seat webbing, comes apart to occupy a very small footprint.

This has been achieved by re-appropriating traditional construction techniques that do not employ the use of glue, screws or mechanical fixings (known as ‘dry assembly’). The structural work is based on design-reversibility raised from conservation. The end product is the result of an experimental approach to turn a devalued resource into an up-cycled commodity.

Figure 4: Stool Prototype #4 (2014). Laser cut HDPE from discarded milk bottles (seat) combined with Tasmanian Oak from a reclaimed bed head (under structure). Exhibited at Craft ACT: Craft and Design Centre as part of Embracing Innovation: Volume 4. 2014. Dimensions 470 x 340 x 400mm. Image courtesy Craft ACT.

Both materials were manipulated using computer numeric control (CNC) and static woodworking machinery – all industrial machines common within local cabinet making or signage industries. The milk bottles were sliced, straightened and laser cut with a specific pattern that allows folding to increase strength as functioning seat webbing.
The stool top rails were CNC routered as a way to increase efficiency and accuracy. The purpose of engaging both production method and reuse of material was simple; to put in place the localism principle of sustainability by using readily accessible locally sourced resources – albeit probable that both materials were not originally manufactured locally – that fuses traditional craft skills with technology.

**Reuse: milk bottles (HDPE)**

As a ‘local’ resource and an effect of café culture, the HDPE milk bottles were sourced from general garbage bins (not recycle bins) from many establishments in my local area. Despite HDPE being one of the most commonly recycled domestic plastics, it became evident that many recyclable products simply miss the opportunity to enter the recycling stream.

If a product does in fact make it into the recycling system, recycling is a down-cycling process as materials are often reconstituted into something of poorer material quality (Mau, Leonard and the Institute Without Boundaries 2004, 191). In my region, the Australian Capital Territory, recyclable waste is collected, sorted locally and then transported to Sydney or Melbourne (Queanbeyan City Council 2015), this adding another step to the process. If plastic is not recycled or reused, the material can take a very long time to photo-degrade, meaning it never actually fully biodegrades (Connacher 2008). In addition, plastic manufacturing is reliant on finite resources and in the case of what seems like a simple and convenient bottle, holds a considerable amount of embodied energy that in turn is sold at low-cost.

When one starts to look more closely at the objects that make up a domestic setting, it becomes apparent that many are used only once and then discarded. A solution to this scenario would be a complete redesign of a system already so heavily embedded within a globalised framework of production, and to reassess a cradle-to-cradle approach on all domestic mainstream packaging. This is a complex and unachievable task for an individual practitioner working within the field of furniture. However, despite the obviously grave issues surrounding recycling and waste, there is an opportunity to perform micro-interventions by salvaging reliable and useable material from the waste stream that is capable of living a second life.

**Reuse: wood**

The under structure for Stool Prototype #4 has been made from a wooden bed head that I have identified as Tasmanian Oak, an Australian hardwood. Like the plastic milk bottles, this material was rescued from the waste stream.

Wood comes from trees; trees being important within our eco-system as they act as a filter for the air we breath and lock in carbon removed from the atmosphere. Being cylindrical in shape, when trees are felled and milled, the timber is generally converted into rectangular slabs or cut into regular pre-determined dimensions; this conversion from circle to rectangular generates wasted material.

After the timber is seasoned, it is taken in that rectangular form and worked in a subtractive manner removing more material to achieve a desired outcome. Although not as harmful as non-biodegradable plastic, wood is still a precious and useable commodity that after its useful original life – in this case as a bed head – can still be made into new things without the use of custom-made specialised tooling or intensive
recycling processes. There is an abundance of wood that already exists within the built
environment that can be value added through reuse or reappropriation provided it has
not been exposed to excessive insect attack or prolonged weather exposure.

Utilising pre-existing material that has lost perceived value, combined with the hand-
of-the-maker, also provides additional opportunities to embed the story of design.

**Design intention**

Affect has been identified as an important component of design. Donald A. Norman
explains that emotion is a crucial layering in the design of everyday products,
suggesting that regardless of how things are made – or how and what they are made
from – the way in which a product communicates intent and how that makes us feel is
the most significant element (Norman 2004, 4-6). From a company perspective,
design affect is further argued as being the means to develop faithful consumer-brand
relationships (Brunner, Emery and Hall 2009, 14-16).

This translates to the user’s connection to an object being inexorably linked to
design’s ability to offer a meaningful story. The meaning, and the intrinsic value of
objects and their associated stories are entwined. The field of conservation would not
exist as it does if there were no value in fixing something beyond the obvious physical
need of preservation or repair.

William McDonough has proposed that “Design is the first signal of human intention”
(Witken 2013); this powerful definition suggests design is the interconnected and
underpinning foundation of all human activity. To define design in such broad terms is
important as this places designers in a somewhat contradictory position as both part
of the problem and part of the solution.

A case study published by The Economist (The Truth About Recycling 2007) ends
with the comment “Waste is really a design flaw”, indicating that this activity is
responsible for the creation of an artificial world that is so grossly impacting on the
natural one. As design is described as our intentional means of shaping the world,
emotion could be a part of how design is used as a tool in progressing toward
sustainability.

**The result**

The motivation behind this experiment was not because I thought the world needed
another stool. It was an attempt to take a familiar form combined with ubiquitous
useable resources recovered from the waste stream. By offering another life through
a structural piece of furniture designed against the criteria of supporting the body, and
through applying traditional craft skills to technology via a physical prototype, I was
able to test if an object such as a plastic milk bottle could be reimagined in form and
used in an application far removed from its original function.

Stool Prototype #4 was born from an observation of waste being both an issue for
design and the result of design. Revisiting local resources is an important component
of sustainability that relies heavily on design as the mechanism through which to
intervene. Combining the intentional reuse of devalued material fused with
craftsmanship, a narrative of ‘design affect’ that speaks beyond the object can be
used as a possible means to bring increased awareness of current and critical
concerns. However small the intervention may be, design has an obligation to
challenge existing norms.
This stool is the fourth prototype in this series and actually functions, for how long however is unknown as it is restricted in weight capacity due to the constraints of component size available from the discarded bed head. It is also still not fully resolved to a point outside an exhibition setting. To achieve a working stool required countless experimental hours to shape a milk bottle into a structural component, a development difficult to reconcile at times – considering using a milk bottle for a seat by means of laser technology, on reflection, seems a complete disparate connection. The experiment did result in a conversion of low capital investment and presented a new opportunity to further exploit the use of plastic milk bottles in an alternative conceptual approach.

Case study: Cloud (2014)

Figure 5: Cloud (2014). Laser cut HDPE from 80 discarded milk bottles, reused monofilament and LED. Currently exhibiting (until Nov. 2015) as part of Bespoke: Design for the People at the Museum of Australian Democracy, Old Parliament House Canberra, Australia. 2014. Dimensions 2000 x 900 x 400mm. Image by Mark Nolan, Chalk Studio (courtesy Museum of Australian Democracy).

Cloud is a concept lighting installation currently on display at the Museum of Australian Democracy, Old Parliament House, Canberra, Australia. This is a site-specific work suspended from the ceiling of what was originally the office suite for the Leader of the Government in the Senate.

In his paper The Role of the Leader of the Government in the Senate, Senator John Button writes about the responsibilities of leadership stating, “In a sense, the Senate leader is the person with whom the buck stops …” (Parliament of Australia 1992). The hangover from the implications of important decision-making still lingers within the walls of the office. Perhaps because the room is quiet, dark and offers no natural light due to the closed shutters, this space forces the atmosphere to be inward and reflective. Positioned in the centre of the room, above which hangs the installation, stands a hexagonal table designed in 1926 by the Federal Capital Commission Architects Department, suggested as referencing the-then-six states (Museum of
Australian Democracy 2014). This table, and office, no doubt bore witness to influential decisions regarding the shape of things-to-come.

Capitalising on the investment made in manipulating reused HDPE milk bottles for Stool Prototype #4, and seeing this as an opportunity to activate a now ‘dormant’ political space, I followed a similar approach and laser cut eighty plastic panels with a hexagonal pattern responding to the shape of the table below. Each panel was individually stitched together from re-used monofilament – underpinned by a conservation design-reverse position – to create a cloud-like form that unpredictably evolved purely from the laser pattern. The internal lighting is one single off-the-shelf LED strip that doubled as a structural spine to assist in maintaining the cloud shape and to function as a suspension point.

In this time of increased environmental awareness clouded by growing waste concerns, politics and design both play a role in influencing and shaping the world. The work suggests that waste, as a product of design, needs to be more tightly governed, regulated and monitored – a matter of politics.


To further heighten the experience of being confronted with ‘illuminated waste’ situated in a room and building that stands for power, I also amplified a clock that manically ticked on the wall. The objective was to draw attention to time and propose if we are really open to change, then time is against all of us.

Cloud was not intended as a hard-edged political statement; it was an opportunity to offer thinking and an alternative use of materials. The aim was to provide a point of view through a physical representation – a form that is driven by intent, meaning and symbolism – just like the hexagonal table below.

**Conclusion: what next?**

As a general overview, the process of design identifies a need, followed then by a solution. From my experience with designing objects, from both an industry and
studio perspective, a concept or form is resolved first, perhaps prototyped, and then put into manufacture using specific tooling or materials sourced or developed to suit that design. Design has always been governed by constraints as it responds to a particular functional need; however working back from a limited materials palette – a design-reverse position – takes away the freedom of seeing raw materials as an infinite resource at immediate disposal.

By creating and instilling a deeper meaning within the ‘stuff’ we design, along with a technical and material focus derived from craft skills, could in turn offer a deeper connection to that ‘stuff’. Design can be used as the catalyst to counteract mass-homogenisation and respond to excessive meaningless consumption of globalised goods and resources – the antithesis of sustainability. A return to local resources is important from this aspect and aside from material and economic benefits, localism offers a connection back to community (Norberg-Hodge, Gorelick and Page 2011).

The work presented here is far from finished; this is rather a marker in time that begins the process – and dialogue – of working toward conservation-worthy objects from materials that have lost perceived value. By approaching practice with a broader understanding of sustainability and the powers of design, small-scale experiments can be used to negotiate with the built environment. Notions derived from conservation are instrumental in reassessing construction methods as questions are raised around the permanence of particular methods and how these can disable an object of value from having a future.

To end on this note: It is interesting that most discarded packaging, regardless of brand – like plastic milk bottles – are standardised items. Obviously coming from high-scale industrial production to hold specific items of weight or volume, this in-turn becomes a reliable stream of material suited back to industrial processes within their ‘raw’ form. Local industry supporting standard machinery such as CNC can be employed for efficient production without the use of specialised tooling.

With that in mind, the research and exploration continues …

References


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Not Without My iPhone

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This paper discusses how societal values can be steered to a more ‘custodial’ use of technological consumer goods and the experiences they offer. I argue that in order to do so, it is beneficial to elucidate the current role the hardware and software design of such products plays in encouraging lack in the contemporary consumer. This paper explores these points using the Apple Inc. iPhone as an object of consumer lack, and references in particular the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Colin Campbell and Daniel Miller. In doing so I draw on my own experience as an iPhone consumer, as my relationship with the device is one that I can speak of with authority. It is from this personal experience and perspective that I unpack the meaning of the word ‘custodial’ in order to posit the ways in which societal values can be guided to a more ‘self-custodial’ use of technological consumer goods and experiences.

Keywords: Design, lack, custodial, custody, self-custody, Apple Inc., iPhone.
It is well accepted that consumption and design exist in a symbiotic relationship in today's consumer society. Aesthetically pleasing design fuels consumption by assisting in the creation of what Pierre Bourdieu refers to as consumer 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1984). However, numerous writings on design suggest that it must be considered in a wider context than just the economic, especially if there is any hope of stemming the tide of current consumer waste patterns (Crocker 2012; Fry 2011; Walker 2013). This paper accepts these proposals and argues that in order to foster a more 'custodial' use of technological consumer goods and experiences, it is advantageous for people to be aware of how the hardware and software design of such products encourages them to feel as if they lack. In order to do so, I draw on my own experience as an Apple Inc. iPhone consumer, and suggest that my interaction with the device is one where I am in the custody of it, rather than being in custody of myself, and my relationship to it. Subsequently, I use my personal experience with the iPhone to unpack the meaning of the word 'custodial' in order to suggest the ways in which societal values can be steered to a more 'self-custodial' use of technological consumer goods and experiences.

The Apple iPhone

To promote the release of the iPhone 6 and 6 Plus, Sir Jonathon Ive, the Senior Vice President of Design at Apple Inc., narrates one of the advertisements for the device.

> A truly great product is ultimately defined by the integration of its hardware and software. … iPhone 6 … is taller and wider. We made the design dramatically thinner while developing a smooth, continuous surface that is comfortable to both hold and use (Apple 2014).

Ive’s use of the word ‘design’ with evocative ones such as ‘smooth’ ‘comfortable’, ‘dramatically’ and ‘great’, speak of a design ethos that has helped cement Apple as one of the most powerful companies in the world (Forbes 2015). The iPhone is potentially one of Apple’s most successful products; as an object it is arguably a ubiquitous device in post-industrial society. Between June 2007 and May 2015, Apple released eight iterations of the iPhone, with major hardware redesigns occurring from the iPhone 4 and 4S onwards. A complete software redesign also accompanied the iPhone 5S and 5C. In the last financial quarter of 2014, Apple sold 74 million iPhones worldwide, with 80 – 85% of their market coming from upgraders (those people who upgrade from a earlier version of the iPhone to the latest one), and 15 – 20% coming from switchers (those people who switch from rival smartphones, such as the Samsung Galaxy, to the iPhone) (Cybart 2015). These statistics are revealing in that they suggest that Apple’s target market is primarily the consumer whose business they already have. It is these consumers they must retain to remain successful. In order to do so I argue that Apple continually elicit feelings of lack from their consumer base, and that they use the hardware and software design of the iPhone as a means of doing so.

The relationship between the term lack and its synonyms - words such as ‘absence’, ‘want’ and ‘deficit’ - begins to reveal the idea that the experience of consumer lack suggests a state of being without, of not having enough. Colin Campbell argues that consumer ‘want’ is related to feelings of desire and pleasure — a trait he attributes to the ‘modern hedonist consumer’ (Campbell 1996). Furthermore, Campbell suggests that the practice of consumption is predicated on the significance people place on how things make them feel. He calls this an ‘emotional ontology’ and posits that ‘... the true judge of whether or not something is real or not is taken to be its power to arouse an emotional response in us’ (Campbell 2004, 35). He argues that the greater the
emotional response a person feels towards an object or experience, the greater their opinion of themselves, as a person, will be. The object or experience stimulates people’s sense of themselves as ‘real.’ Campbell writes

We need regular exposure to fresh stimuli if boredom is to be avoided and the continuing need for ontological reassurance satisfied … fresh stimuli … that will produce a strong reaction in us (2004, 37).

This process, one of feeling oneself as ‘real’ through consumption, is not a one-off experience, but must be repeated again and again in order to reconfirm and affirm peoples identity, and to create value in their lives. I argue that this continual exposure to ‘fresh stimuli’ perpetuates feelings of lack in a consumer. There is always something new to want and experience.

The release of the first iPhone, as Campbell would suggest, gave consumers ‘fresh stimuli’ in that it expanded the experience of using an iPod, Apple’s revolutionary portable media player released in 2001. The iPhone extended the iPod’s functions by enabling people to make telephone calls, send text messages, receive emails, take photographs and surf the Internet. The precise use of words in the advertising campaign for the first iPhone explicitly references many of the device’s functions and how to use them. For example, in one advertisement the words ‘This how you turn it on. This is your music. This is your email. This is the Web. And this is a call. On your iPhone’ are spoken over a simple shot of a male hand holding and rotating the device to access content (Adweek 2012). The advertisement also demonstrated Apple’s new touchscreen technology and indicated that the experience of using the iPhone was highly tactile; consumers could, and continue to, interact with the device using nothing more than their fingers to access information. These gestures once learnt become intuitive. Guy Julier writes

Using [the iPhone] became a more bodily act both in allowing you to take or find ‘your’ information anywhere and in the extended range of physical interaction with its information that it facilitated (Julier 2014, 223).

The ways in which the following iterations of the iPhone could be integrated into a consumer’s everyday life expanded as Apple streamlined their hardware design, and added to their software design with functions such as Siri (a voice recognition personal assistant), Facetime (face to face communication software) and the Health app. Apple’s ‘App Store’, their digital distribution platform for mobile apps on iOS (Apple’s operating system), also continues to expand. Independent developers, under strict guidelines set by Apple, create ‘apps’ to be used on the device. Apps enable iPhone users to engage with things as diverse as weather updates, buying fashion and interact with social media. Indeed, possibly one of the most pervasive functions of the iPhone has been the ways in which it has enabled the use of popular social network platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram to flourish, and like the device itself, become ubiquitous forms of communication for people in post-industrial society. I suggest that the use of social media apps contribute to the integration of the iPhone into a consumer’s daily life to a point where the separation between the subject – in this case the Apple consumer, and the object – the iPhone – begins to obfuscate. Furthermore, I argue that this blurring facilitates the experience of lack, and contributes to a state where people are allowing themselves to be in the custody of their iPhones, rather than being in custody of themselves and their relationship to the device.
Subjects and Objects

Daniel Miller suggests that people should not see themselves as separate from objects; rather, they should view their relationship to things as symbiotic. In other words, Miller argues that there is little division between subject and object, that to understand ourselves as human it is necessary to recognise our ‘fundamental materiality’ and the material culture that grows from and supports this (Miller 2010, 4-5). He suggests that the relationship between a person and their object works to socially define and position the individual to the point where the object becomes so integrated into their daily life that it becomes unnoticeable. Miller writes,

[W]hat is important is that [objects] should not draw our attention to them by appearing in someway wrong, inappropriate or misconceived. More appropriate terms are warm, friendly, modern or stylish (Miller 1987, 102).

A key word here in relation to design is ‘appear.’ Design is concerned with how objects look and how objects are used. Design is also linked to the value people attribute to objects in their lives, and how they use the value of objects to situate themselves in relation to others. Pierre Bourdieu suggests that people choose to position themselves socially through the aesthetic value of the consumer goods available to them. He argues that this positioning designates a disavowal, a refusal of people to be defined by anything other than what their aesthetic choice creates (Bourdieu, 1984). Bourdieu posits that this positioning is played out through ‘taste’, that ‘taste is the basis of all that one has … and all that one is for others, whereby one classifies oneself and is classified by others’ (1984, 56). Miller contributes to this discourse, stating that the point at which an object is potentially noticeable is when it defines the ‘taste’ of the person who owns it (1987, 102).

The iPhone is an object that is not ‘unnoticeable’ as such – if anything it demands our attention with its trills and bleeps and flashes. The device’s elegant, sparse and futuristic hardware design, and the small Apple logo on the upper back of its underside, contributes to its recognisability as an iPhone rather than one of its rival devices. However, by the release of the iPhone 5S and 5C, and the recent iPhone 6 and 6 Plus, it is a device that has assimilated into contemporary consumer society to a point where it is arguably ubiquitous. The device’s ubiquity, and the pervasiveness of its use by people to live their lives, strengthens its position as an ‘unnoticeable’ object. In 2015 the iPhone does not seem ‘wrong or inappropriate’ (1987, 102). This brings to mind Bourdieu’s idea that ‘[a]ny legitimate work tends … to impose the norms of its own perception’ and Miller’s argument that the more an individual stops noticing the objects they use, the more ‘powerful and determinant’ the objects come to be in their lives (1984, 20; Miller 2010, 54) Bourdieu and Miller’s concepts substantiate my argument that people are permitting themselves to be in the custody of their iPhones, rather than being in custody of themselves and their relationship to the device.

Evidence of the pervasive use of the iPhone is apparent when I venture out into social spaces. Two stories illustrate this idea. At a recent outing to farewell a friend who was traveling to Europe, I raised my head from checking Instagram on my iPhone 6 to see a whole circle of my friends, their necks bent as mine had just been, staring into their devices. One by one they pulled their eyes away from their iPhone screens and noted what I was seeing. We all laughed at the ridiculousness of the situation and put our devices away. No more than ten minutes later our iPhones were in hand again. A few weeks later I attended a street art festival in Port Adelaide, South Australia called Wonderwalls. Artists from all over the world had come to draw huge pieces on disused, soviet era looking buildings. At the opening night party I met one of the artists, a woman
in her mid twenties from Adelaide. I asked if she was an Apple user and as I recall she replied that she wasn’t anymore, that her Mac broke and she couldn’t afford another one. I then asked her what kind of phone she used. Pulling out her iPhone (it was either a 4 or a 5), she replied that yes she was. As I remember, she intimated that she had forgotten about the device, and something to the effect that she saw it as just an extension of herself now.

Custody

The stories I have just told paint a picture of how people interact with and view their iPhone. Although there is no doubt that this technology has provided an ease and speed of communication, it often seems as if people are at the behest of their iPhone rather than being in command of their device. In other words, people seem to be in the custody of their device, rather than being custodial of themselves, their device, and their relationship to their device. To clarify my use of the words ‘custody’ and ‘custodial’ – ‘custody’ refers to an individual being held captive and bound by something, and ‘custodial’ signifies being under the protective care and supervision of, in this case, the self. In both instances the use of these words are predicated by their legal connotations. For example, ‘custody’ can be aligned to metaphors of imprisonment and captivity, whereas the word ‘custodial’ and the idea of a ‘custodial relationship’ that I will raise shortly, evokes the idea of child being placed in the care of an adult.

The iPhone captivates, distracts, seduces and demands attention, seemingly coming to life as information is received. It is a device that pulls people away from their present situation to other spaces. These spaces may be those that are happening simultaneously to the one a person is in, spaces of the past, or spaces of the future. In each instance a person experiences a relinquishing of part of the self to the custody of the iPhone and the information that it funnels, information that is not within their immediate control.

To use my own relationship with my iPhone as an example, the experience of being in the custody of my device is one that is felt thus – I am present in a particular space, in a particular moment in time. My iPhone, as it usually is, is close by; it trills and lights up. I have a call. It is my sister who is a few suburbs away. As we talk a trio of beeps tell me I have a text message. I finish the call and check the message. A friend tells me she has just posted a photograph on Instagram. I open up Instagram, and look at the image – here I am from the night before. As this happens my iPhone reminds me of an appointment I must attend tomorrow. I can click on the link in reminder which navigates to the website of the place of my appointment – this is where I will be the following day. I put my iPhone to sleep and place it to the side of me. A moment later it trills and lights up; the process of checking and looking begins again.

There are also moments when I require no prompting by the device to check for change, for updates, to see if anything new has happened. These experiences are ones where space and time coalesce into the screen of my iPhone. In each instance there is a giving away of myself to the custody of things that are happening, things that have already happened, and things that may potentially happen. The very interesting point to make is that I am allowing this to happen to me by engaging with my iPhone in this way. I am allowing myself to be in the custody of my device.
Self-Custody

How can a more ‘custodial’ relationship towards technological consumer goods and experiences be fostered when current forms of consumerism are so pervasive in everyday life? I argue that in order to achieve a more ‘custodial’ relationship – one that is focused on safeguarding and safekeeping the self – towards objects such as the iPhone, people must begin with a focus on themselves in order to foster a state of ‘self-custody.’ Focus on the self would involve the practice of being watchful, careful and vigilant on a regular basis in relation to the ways in which we, as individuals, relate to technological consumer goods and the experiences they provide.

Michel Foucault argues that it is through the ‘care of the self’, which falls under his ‘technologies of self’, that people may be able to reach a level of understanding of themselves and the world that surrounds them (Foucault 1997). Foucault writes...

...the problem for the subject or the individual soul is to turn its gaze upon itself, to recognize itself in what it is and, recognizing itself in what it is, to recall the truths that issue from it and that it has been able to contemplate (Foucault 1997, 285).

Accepting Foucault’s proposition, I suggest that the development of a state of ‘self-custody’ would involve the practice of self-care. This would involve a personal inspection of the self on a regular basis, a questioning of and to the self in relation to the use of technological goods, such as the iPhone, and the crucial ways we, as individuals, permit them to have power over our lives. Such questions could be ‘why do I feel compelled to check my iPhone all the time?’, ‘what am I really looking for on my iPhone’ and ‘why do I feel anxious and hollow when people don’t respond to me on social media?’ The practice of self-care would also involve the individual answering these questions to the best of their ability. On a practical level, the exercise of self-care could involve small steps such an individual leaving their device at home when they go for a walk, when they interact face to face with people, and in another room when they sleep. It is potentially through such means that people can instil in themselves the kernels of self-custody – a state where they safeguard, protect and safe keep themselves from being overtly in the custody of their technological devices.

The development of a state of ‘self-custody’ in relation to technological goods and experiences, coupled with an understanding of how people are made to feel as if they lack through hardware and software design, is of crucial importance as the use of wearable technology, such as the recently released Apple Watch, becomes increasingly prevalent in the contemporary world. It is in this way people can potentially hold on to a sense of self, a sense of who they are as human beings existing in the natural world, without the input of technology and the multiplicity of worlds and spaces technology offers.

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Melinda Gaughwin is a PhD candidate at the University of South Australia. Her PhD research, titled ‘Not without my iPhone: a social study of design, consumerism, desire and Apple Inc.’ seeks to explore relationships of consumer desire for Apple products and the ways in which such desire is elicited through the design and advertising of the iPhone and the Apple Watch specifically.